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ABSTRACT

The point of view that teachers use in responding to students' writing affects the kinds of dramatized presences that teacher responses create. Such presences make available a range of reading and writing roles that students may adopt or reject. For a dramatic presence to be felt by a reader, a writer must select and sustain a clear means of perception of the text, a point of view persona separate from the reader, from whose vantage point the text is viewed. In one context, a teacher may assume the role of evaluator. Criticism may come from a third person, omniscient, objective point of view ("this paper fails to support its thesis"), a second person persona ("you fail to support your thesis"), or a more personal, first person source ("I feel your paper does not support its thesis"). In another context, the teacher might take on a writerly role, and respond to student writing descriptively, from either a first, second, or third person perspective. The best teachers can possibly do is to make the presences or roles clear, and ask themselves if the roles would be as clear and useful to the teachers as writers if they were asked to negotiate them. (SG)

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Initial Gestures: Point of View and Context in Responding to Student Writing

In her essay, "Responding to Student Writing," Nancy Sommers suggests that we "comment on student writing to dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students become that reader themselves" (170). Part of Sommers's statement--"to help our students become that reader themselves"--certainly raises the question of writing and identity. The simple formulation of this notion is that we can make students better writers if we make them better readers because they will be better readers and revisers of their work. But a critical assumption in this simple formulation is that students can negotiate their roles as readers and writers by experiencing the dramatized presence of a reader other than themselves. My purpose is to explore how the point of view we use in responding to a student's text affects the kinds of dramatized presences we create in our responses. I will suggest that these dramatized presences make available a range of reading and writing roles that students may adopt--or reject.

This more complex matter of writing and identity is described in the identity negotiations theory of Robert Brooke, who draws on social psychologists such as Erving Goffmann, political and cultural theories of educators and feminists such as Henry Giroux and Adrienne Rich, and interpretive anthropologists such as George Marcus and Michael

Fischer (11-12; 17). I draw on Brooke's theory in two ways:

1) Given that our comments create dramatized presences for students, it is from the range of these presences that we expect students to identify writers' roles, and

2) it is from this range of writers' roles that students will negotiate their identities as writers.

Point of view, in the dramatic context that Sommers suggests, is more than the simple assignment of person in writing. For a dramatic presence to be felt by a reader, a writer must select and sustain a clear means of perception of the text--a point of view persona, separate from the reader--from whose eyes, from whose vantage point the text is viewed (Minot 91). The separation between this reader and the point of view persona is critical. Wayne Booth, for example, suggests that dramatic narratives involve varying degrees of distance between the point of view persona and the reader--in this case the student who is reading our comments (155). Booth further describes this distance between the point of view persona and the reader as being related to the values and beliefs the reader brings to the reading and those implied in the point of view persona (156). What does this, then, have to do with identity negotiation? I believe quite a bit. According to Brooke, through the process of reading and writing students work to identify which behaviors are valued by the communities they seek to enter, and ask themselves if they share these values (8). It would seem, then, that 1) the narrative personae we create in our comments to students about their writing create a number of available roles for the students to consider in terms of their identities as writers, 2) the means of perceiving the text--the point

of view--is a significant factor in creating these roles, and 3) there are varying degrees of separateness, of distance, between the roles these narrative personae suggest and the roles students may wish to adopt.

In this context, I feel the issue of point of view and identity negotiation is more than a simple matter of a particular point of view a teacher chooses to use when commenting on a student's writing. The point of view personae felt by the student should suggest clear writers' roles. Part of this clarity involves creating point of view personae who are writerly, not, say, "institutional," or otherwise. Brooke writes, "[W]e need to present writers' roles in a way which allows them to be recognized and explored [by students]" (142).

Given this objective--that the roles suggested by the point of view personae we create when we respond to students' writing be clear and writerly--I would like to propose two common contexts for responding to student writing, and explore the implications of different selections of point of view on the roles created for student writers to explore.

Context One: Teacher as Evaluator

In this context, the student performs and the teacher's comments are relegated to how well the student has performed versus established criteria. Let's imagine a third-person, omniscient objective point of view persona who makes the following response to a student's manuscript: "The paper fails to support its thesis." What kind of persona is this? Certainly, the persona feels "institutional," not writerly. The persona also feels much like that described by Andrea A. Lunsford during a panel session on a recent national study of

teachers' written comments on student essays: "disinterested" and "distant" ("Data, Methods, and Analysis"). Perhaps most importantly, this point of view persona suggests a paradoxical role to the student: that the student become an evaluator of writing; therefore, the persona does not suggest a role that the student writer sees as available to adopt, or one with which she or he can comply without being generally outside the context of writing all together. This persona, in a sense, can displace or distance the writer from the context of writing.

While it is true that the second-person persona suggested by a comment such as, "You fail to support your thesis," creates a role in which a student is responsible for the writing, the second-person persona is also one who holds writers responsible for intentions, for meanings in writers, not in texts, or in transactional or social contexts. This second-person persona, then, also tends to displace the student from available writerly roles.

The third case, the use of the first-person in a comment such as, "I feel your paper does not support its thesis," creates a persona who values evaluation, but it also creates one who is subtly distinct from the third-person persona: the first-person persona suggests an individual who is part of an audience, a role that can be useful to a student writer in identity negotiation because, 1) the role of an individual reader in an audience is a role that is reasonably available to all student writers, and 2) audiences can be plural by nature; therefore, non-compliance with a particular comment made by the first-person persona does not exclude or displace the writer from all writers' roles.

Context Two: Teacher as Writer

While writers such as Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff have identified a number of writerly ways to respond to texts (1-5), for this context I have chosen one of these whose purpose is clearly different from evaluation--descriptive responding. For example, let's imagine a third-person omniscient objective persona: "The thesis of this paper is 'X.'" This persona is not clearly institutional in the sense of evaluation; however, the persona does remind one of C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon's responder who has always and foremost in mind the "Ideal Text," one that a student writer is expected to discover. According to Knoblauch and Brannon, in this situation, "A student's task is to match an Ideal Text in the teacher's imagination which is insinuated through the reader's commentary" (120). This persona suggests that writers' roles are limited to those in which the writer must undertake a kind of quest to find a Holy Grail. Moreover, the consequence of not complying with these roles can be disastrous: the student will continue to wander the Wasteland.

The second-person persona--"Your thesis is 'X'"--again suggests suggests that the student is responsible for intentions, but in this case another persona emerges. This persona suggests another role for the student: the infallible reader, because the responder assumes to know the writer's intentions. This is a role that is not reasonably available to student readers and writers--and, I might add, it is also not available to teachers of reading and writing.

The first-person persona, "I feel the thesis of your paper is 'X,'" creates a persona who is not describing the "Ideal Text" or the infallible reader, but one who, again, is part of an audience, a role

reasonably available to student writers: the student can comply or not comply and not be excluded from a range of writerly roles.

Conclusion

These are certainly simplistic contexts and cases, but the notion that our responses to students' texts necessarily create dramatized "presences" or personae, and therefore writers' roles, has important implications for other writing contexts: peer tutoring, collaborative learning, cultural contexts, and, for example, "the web of institutional constraints" that Lunsford suggests "do not make room for individual teachers' voices" ("Data, Analysis, and Methods"). In addition, I have not addressed other elements that texture our comments: for example, the use of interrogatives, examples, and metaphors. I have also not addressed the exigencies of responding, or the practical importance at times of creating dramatized presences that contain mixtures of voices, such as those suggested by Elaine O. Lees in her typology of responding (370-71).

My rather simplistic contexts and cases do generally suggest that we try to create writer-personae who are clearly present for our students and who do not limit the range of writers' roles students can adopt or not adopt without being displaced from the writing situation all together. When writers such as Edward M. White suggest that we make "creative misreadings" of our students' texts to show them our perceptions of the possibilities in their texts (190), the personae created by such "creative misreadings" certainly suggest writers' roles that are open and available to students and teachers alike.

Point of view, I feel, is one critical decision we make when we

choose the means by which our comments are perceived. In selecting a point of view, we create "presences"--personae--who suggest writers' roles for our students to explore. The best we can possibly do is to make these presences--these roles--clear, and perhaps to ask ourselves if these roles would be as clear and useful to us as writers if we were asked to negotiate them.

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